

## The New Jersey Shore...



Outmoded World War I concrete ship lies partly submerged off Cape May Point as reminder of futile Delaware ferry service attempt in 1926.

# KEYS

## to the CAPE

*Sun-Swept Islands Abound Off Cape May Peninsula and Spectacular Days Could Be in Store for Area Resorts If Garden State Parkway's Full Length Is Utilized by Vacationists from Northern New Jersey*

By **JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM**



Fishing fleet basin along one of canals at Sea Isle City on Ludlam Beach. Area was developed

in 1881 by Charles K. Landis who founded city of Vineland 20 years earlier amid pine barrens.

**C**APE MAY COUNTY got into the resort business two centuries ago just by sticking its peninsular nose into the shipping business sailing to and from Philadelphia. An occasional passing sea captain stopped off, liked what he saw and eventually found the chance to earn an extra shilling or two by bringing vacationists to the watering place. It was that natural.

Nothing much spectacular has happened since those easy beginnings, except maybe at Wildwood, where weekend crowds of 150,000 are no surprise.

*This is the eighth of a series of articles on the New Jersey Shore. The next installment will consider the coastline changes under battering of wind and sea and measures undertaken to combat erosion.*

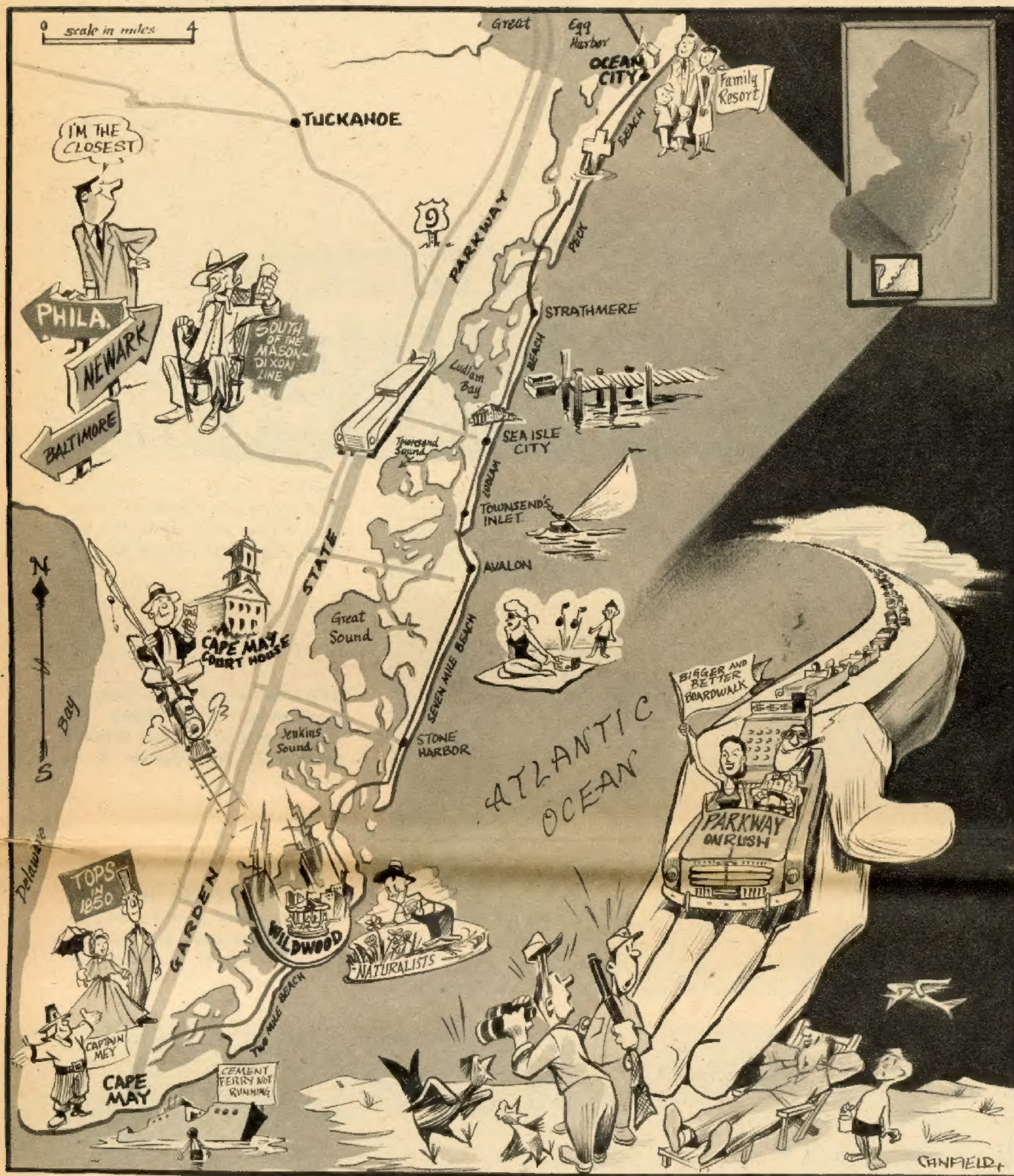
All other resorts on the New Jersey cape more or less pride themselves on being intimately quiet "family-type" towns. Growth they might accept—providing, of course, they could stay small at the same time.

The essential charm of Cape May resortland is its ability to stay simple, to be natural in a world that savors flash and show. Still, because of the Garden State Parkway, spectacular days could be on the horizon, days which will see great crowds of people overrun the lonely sand dunes and chase the migrating birds off to the Salem County marshes.

If wind-tossed dunes and quaint towns and uncrowded beaches and bird sanctuaries are of as much value as Cape May's devotees think, then the arrival of the Parkway may be a blessing only to real estate holders and concessionaires. Cape May right now is relatively unspoiled—the consequence of being off the beaten path.

**C**APE MAY'S resorts are all on islands, allowing for a bit of point-stretching to say that Cape May Canal—though man-made—places Cape May town and Cape May Point on an island of their own. This isn't reaching too far at that; until a century ago Cape





May town actually was an island and bore the name "Cape Island."

Elsewhere, the islands exist beyond dispute. Islands abound off Cape May peninsula, where marshy sedgelands taper out into the Atlantic Ocean. Even a casual glance at a road map discloses the islands; a close study of a detailed map shows nearly 150 sizable islands set among the sounds and thoroughfares—islands normally known only to birds and bird hunters or bird watchers.

Only four of these 150 islands have importance in a resort sense, and those are the four islands fronting directly on the sea. These four line up like giant footsteps—each footstep almost exactly the same length: seven miles, give or take a few rods. The sandy prints are as if they had been made by seven-mile boots, striding southward to the bay.

These insular quadruplets, really

could be called "The New Jersey Keys," meeting as they do the dictionary definition of a key as "a low island . . . off the coast." More, they are as closely related to one another as the Florida Keys (not that anyone pretends New Jersey's Keys are as unique or as renowned as those coral beads strung off Florida's cape).

**EXCITEMENT** smolders among those who wish for a tidal wave of dollars to flood down the Parkway from northern New Jersey and metropolitan New York. When New Yorkers and New Yorkers become accustomed to the Parkway's lower reaches—the tidal wave wishers reason—they won't stop their automobiles short of Cape May County.

That's possible, but right now Cape May peninsula belongs heart and soul to Philadelphia, Baltimore and points

south and west—and always has. This is mainly a matter of elementary geography: Newark is more than twice as far from Cape May as Philadelphia is and Baltimore is 20 miles closer than Newark to Cape May. The cape's point, almost 55 miles below the imaginary Mason-Dixon Line, is on the same latitude as Washington, D.C.

Tradition plays a part in this Philadelphia and southern orientation, too. Philadelphians first discovered Cape May. They first exploited the Cape May sands, they provided the early transportation, they coaxed north the leading families of Maryland and Virginia. They set the pattern of dignity and quiet. They did practically everything but induce the birds to make Cape May the foremost northern stop-over spot in their annual migrations. The birds took care of that themselves.

Cape May's resort hopes began to be based on Philadelphians so many,

many years ago—two centuries or so ago.

**T**WO centuries? Resort hopes? Why folks had enough to do with battling the frontier and grumbling at Britain's taxation without needing vacations 200 years ago, didn't they? They probably should have, but in 1766 a gentleman named Robert Parsons advertised in The Pennsylvania Gazette his willingness to sell his 254-acre Cape May plantation. Unless Parsons engaged in traditional resort exaggeration, vacationers already knew Cape May's attractions because he extolled the location thusly:

"... within One Mile and a Half of the Sea Shore, where a number resort for health and bathing in the Water . . ."

The cape had this in its favor: its bulbous nose was prominent. It was easy to find. Capt. Cornelius Jacobsen Mey saw the cape in 1620 and modestly named it Cape Mey (Anglicized to May in later years) for himself. Whalers arrived through the 17th century to hunt whales where the broad Delaware merged with the limitless Atlantic. They came by boat and they lived by boat and they left by boat; there wasn't a landlubber in the lot of 'em.

**F**IRST vacationists visited to improve their constitutions (no 18th century Philadelphian could admit to anything so worldly as sitting in the sand for sheer enjoyment). The City of Brotherly Love by 1801 suffered sufficiently from the ills of civilization to make it feasible for Ellis Hughes to insert his memorable notice in The Philadelphia Daily Aurora:

"The Public are respectfully informed that the Subscriber has prepared himself for entertaining company who use sea bathing, and he is accommodated with extensive house room, with Fish, Oysters, Crabs, and good liquors. Care will be taken of gentlemen's Horses . . ."

Customers of 1801 needed the ability to be easily pleased: The "extensive" Hughes house looked positively barnlike—and sleeping accommodations didn't include private rooms with bath. Brother Hughes drew a curtain across the middle of the cavernous room at night. Men slept on one side, women on the other. With such mass chaperonage the hotel had no need for a house detective.

Transportation difficulties held down the crowds at first, but by 1815 the fast sailing sloop *Morning Star* made regular weekly trips to the cape and the following year a steamboat and packet line advertised a schedule for the "bathing season." Steamboat service gained full stature within the next decade and at the same time the roads to Philadelphia improved; by 1825 instead of being wretched the roads were passable (if poor).

**S**OPHISTICATED newcomers demanded something superior to Ellis Hughes' curtained dormitory. Thomas Hughes built his three-story Congress Hall in 1816, partitioned off into rooms to accommodate 100 boarders. Congress Hall had no paint on the out-

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# CAPE MAY RESORTS

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side, no plaster or paint inside, but people shook their heads anyway at "Tommy's Folly" (too big, too grand for Cape May, they warned). Tommy laughed last; vacationers filled "the folly" the first year.

Cape May quickly became America's premier resort. By Civil War time no resort in the nation matched the New Jersey cape resort—provided fashion and dignity and the fame of its guests were the criteria. Saratoga boasted of pre-eminence (and Long Branch made some counter claims), but by the 1850s Cape May probably ranked first among all vacationlands.

Southern planters and the elite of the North brought along their gleaming carriages, drawn by horses whose gold-ornamented harness glittered in the bright cape sun. Nationally famous bands played in the fine hotels. Planters and statesmen whiled away fretful hours in such respected gambling establishments as Henry Cleveland's "Blue Pig."

Two damaging fires between the season of 1856 and 1857 swept away hotels with rooms for 2,400 visitors and the Civil War ended the visits of those from Virginia and the Old South. Cape May never completely regained its past glories (although it never fully lost them either, in the manner of Long Branch in later years).

THE chief blame for Cape May's subsidence, if blame there was, rode on the railroad tracks which in 1854 linked Camden and the seashore at Atlantic City. Philadelphians took to the rails, Atlantic City blossomed and Cape May began to find comfort in traditions. Don't get the idea that Cape May became a ghost town; in 1866 more than 50,000 visitors arrived during the summer. One acidulous New York writer of the day found the society less than dashing. Said he:

"No changeful and effervescent visitors are they; yearly come the spinster and dowager habitues . . . fond are they of whist and moderate are the stakes there-at . . ."

Cape May whist players got their railroad in 1863, and it caused a spurt—but nothing sensational. Nothing moves fast in Cape May County. No one even thought to establish resorts on the four seven-mile islands out on the fringe of the sedgelands until 1879, when the Lake brothers of Pleasantville established Ocean City.

THE Lakes—S. Wesley, Ezra B. and James E.—all were Methodist ministers and they sailed out to Peck's Beach looking not for enjoyment but rather for a place to establish a camp meeting. The brothers stood beneath the tangled branches of a cedar tree in late 1879 and dedicated the lonely island to clean living.

Ingeniously, by a system of cross-deeding, the Lakes (and their Ocean City Association) secured control of every square foot of the island. The Association wrote restrictions (including prohibition of intoxicants) into every deed. To the present day trans-



ABOVE: Music Pier, familiar sight along boardwalk at Ocean City which calls itself the nation's "Greatest Family Resort."



LEFT: Marina at Cape May in southernmost New Jersey. The cape's point is on same latitude as that of Washington, D. C.



BELOW: Wildwood's beach has room to spare and its boardwalk (background) has amusements to delight one and all.

fers of title are always made subject to those restrictions, "to insure the original purpose of the party of the first part (the Association) in securing the whole island as a Christian Seaside Resort."

As the Lakes held their first camp meeting in 1880 and built their Tabernacle in 1881, men whose philosophies frankly didn't rule out either demon rum or the possibility of making money looked with interest at the other islands.

It took an experienced eye to visualize the possibilities of those barren wastelands, and just such an experienced eye belonged to Charles K.

Landis, who started to develop Sea Isle City in 1881. After all, Landis 20 years before conceived the city of Vineland in the midst of the pine barrens; it didn't take nearly as much vision to see the resort possibilities of Ludlam Beach.

A RAILROAD SPUR reached Sea Isle City in 1884 and the resort expanded mightily. Brilliant electric lights gained a measure of fame for Sea Isle City in 1893 and by the turn of the century the island spot had 30 hotels and a dedicated crowd of Philadelphia admirers, many of them both wealthy and noted.

Trains rolled all the way down to Townsend's Inlet on the south end of Landis' island and for two years in the late 1880s the railroad wished mightily that it could bridge the inlet and serve Avalon across the water. Avalon, founded by the Seven-Mile Beach Co. of Philadelphia in 1887, finally welcomed its first train in 1889 after the railroad received the right to cross the inlet on two draw bridges.

The fourth of the islands—Five-Mile Beach—first received developers in 1880, the year Frank Swope and some friends used a day of fishing to plan Anglesea (now North Wildwood). They built 50-room Hotel



Anglesea, on a spot long since eroded away by the ocean.

Wildwood waited for another Vine-lander to arrive in 1890, however, before it achieved prominence. That year Philip Pontius Baker, state senator from Cumberland County, bought 100 acres—half of it in "grand timber," with many trees 100 feet tall. Gigantic grape vines reached through the tree tops and festoons of beautiful green moss hung from the cedars and oaks. Underneath, huckleberry bushes grew as tall as 20 feet.

**T**HE natural beauty of the spot attracted many naturalists and scientists to see the trees and plants; some claimed that every wild flower known to exist between Maine and Florida had been found in aptly named Wildwood before 1910.

Cape May town, happily serene with its memories of the days when Presidents Pierce, Buchanan, Grant and Arthur came for long splashes in the sea, received another joyous thrill in 1889 after President Benjamin Harrison found the cape exactly suited to a president and his family.

The Harrisons stayed slightly out of town, over at Sea Grove (now Cape May Point), founded in 1875 by Presbyterians who hoped their town would be "a moral and religious seaside home for the glory of God and the welfare of man." John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia store magnate, invited the Harrisons for a stay in 1889 and the following year friends of the President built him a handsome \$10,000 cottage at the Point.

The cape stayed quiet, true, but it didn't stand competely still.

Pittsburgh financiers sparked a 1902 development in Cape May town, filling in hundreds of acres of marshland north of Madison Ave. and creating virtually a new city. This is the part of Cape May surrounding the Hotel Admiral, a south Jersey landmark towering nine stories above the beach. Built in 1908 by the East Cape May Co., developers of the marshland, the Admiral still is the largest hotel in the state south of Atlantic City.

**W**ILDWOOD ranked only fourth among the Cape May resort towns in 1902, but many things happened in 1912 to propel Five Mile Beach into

unquestioned Cape May resort leadership. That year Wildwood and Holly Beach merged, a new boardwalk was ready for the 1912 season and simultaneously a new automobile bridge reached out over the marshlands to the mainland.

All these things in one year, and the Dollar Excursion, too! During the height of the season for 30 years the railroads each weekend ran long excursion trains from Philadelphia to Wildwood. A noted "Fisherman's Special," bristling with anglers' poles, also made the one-day, \$1 run on weekends. Excursions built Wildwood into the big amusement-centered resort of the modern day.

Then came the boom—and the bust.

Maybe it started because Florida's wild land deals made the headlines. Maybe the building of the new Philadelphia-Camden bridge in the early 1920s awakened land holders to potential values. Maybe too many people had too much money. At any rate, the New Jersey shore had an unparalleled land boom and bust in the 1920s. Nowhere was the impact felt more cruelly than in the New Jersey Keys.

Everyone experienced the tremendous urge to speculate in land. Even the bootleggers moaned that they made more money in real estate than in rum-running—and real estate was legal. The whole precarious business evaporated in 1926; the southern New Jersey shore didn't need a Wall Street upheaval to tell them times could be tough. Memories of wild prices are legion from Ocean City to Cape May; one authenticated tale tells of a \$75,000 lot (boom price) being bought for \$750 a year after the 1926 collapse.

**T**HROUGHOUT all the 20th Century story of Cape May has run the desperate hope that just around the corner would be a ferry across the bay to Delaware. This—even more than the Garden State Parkway—would bring rapid changes to New Jersey's Cape and Keys.

Ferries have crossed the bay several times. As early as 1900 an old side-wheeler made unsatisfactory runs and in 1903 the 200-foot Caroline tried without success to establish service. The most elaborate scheme, pushed in 1926 by "Colonel" Jesse Rosenfeld of Baltimore, tried to use outmoded

World War I concrete ships as ferry slips. That failed also; one of the abandoned ships rests yet in the water off Cape May Point.

The Cape May Ferry is much in the air—and much at sea. Delaware and much of the South are isolated from New Jersey by the broad bay. From Cape Henlopen, Delaware, to Cape May Point is 170 miles by highway—and 12 miles by water. Ferry proponents are numerous and enthusiastic; they claim one out of every five cars in the United States is within reach of the Capeline ferry.

**T**HE ferry, when completed (or IF completed) is likely to make all Cape May's resorts more than ever attuned to the South. The area within an arc swung from Washington to Richmond to Norfolk will be within easy driving range of Cape May. The "grand old days" of the Southern aristocracy sojourning at the cape may come back—within limits; Southern aristocracy isn't what it used to be.

There's many a slip between ferry planning and ferry running. While they wait, Cape May County's resorts have infinite appeal.

Say, for example, that the desire is for wide, safe beaches. The Keys have those—beaches as much as 1,000 feet wide from boardwalk to high water mark. Wildwood, in fact, claims it has "the world's finest beach." The world is a big place, but unquestionably Wildwood has the finest beach in New Jersey and probably the finest among all Northern resorts.

Wildwood is an increasingly vital southern New Jersey magnet. Its amusement-filled boardwalk adds proof that most New Jersey Shore visitors like mechanical rides and "skill" games and "name" bands and "name" singers as much as they like sand and surf and sea breezes. Wildwood is gay and amusing and—like most boardwalk towns—extracts from visitors a bit more in the way of cash than its neighbors.

**O**CEAN CITY, old and secure and undeviatingly "dry," calls itself "America's Greatest Family Resort." Again that covers a big chunk of geography, but this can be said—whole generations of Pennsylvania and Delaware families have been com-

ing to Ocean City through the decades since the Lakes began their resort.

Ocean City visitors love the long boardwalk, with just enough amusement to be appealing, and they love the famous Music Pier, where all season long free orchestral concerts are given. They appreciate the 7½-acre municipal recreation center, where among other games, shuffleboard is a way of life. Ocean City has the largest shuffleboard courts north of St. Petersburg and the Ocean City Shuffleboard Club has a membership of more than 1,000 members. Religion still is significant; Ocean City thinks it may be the only major resort in the world where boardwalk theaters are given over to church services on Sunday evenings.

Between Ocean City and Cape May city are a half dozen or so seaside cities, each of them distinctively different. All of them, incidentally, have been linked since the 1940s through completion of the Ocean Drive—amply marked all the way from Atlantic City south by "The Sign of the Gull."

Sea Isle City and Avalon earnestly maintain their island personalities, set more than seven decades ago. Avalon's boast that it is the "Gem of the Jersey Coast" is best understood by walking through the magnificent dunes on the lower side of the town. Sea Isle City boasts of its canals and its colorful fishing fleet and its quiet ways. Finally, there is Stone Harbor, established in about 1910 and now a town proud of its neatly landscaped streets and its seven back door harbors and canals.

**C**APE MAY town stands alone, unique among all resorts. Here and there a modern motel proves progress, but essentially the city is proud of its past, of its old vintage hotels, of the fact that in the city are more descendants of Mayflower passengers than there are in Plymouth. This is the way an official Chamber of Commerce statement describes Cape May town:

"No need to pine for the day of yore . . . Now you can have them today and every day in the oldest seashore resort in America . . . Cape May stands as a classic out of the past, retaining the full flavor of the gaslight era . . . its Victorian homes, its tree-lined avenues, its wealth of unspoiled loveliness deftly combine with modern advancements to achieve a rare and delicate balance of the old and new that is as inviting as it is unique."

That's official—and that's not the way most resorts talk about themselves, even when their hotels are practically as old (and often much less charming).

Far-reaching changes for Cape and Keys could be just around the next bend of the Parkway or just beyond the next whistle of a ferryboat. Larger crowds are inevitable, bigger and better boardwalk fevers may beset towns which today feel dunes and simplicity and herons and migrating birds are enough. Temptation has transformed other resorts; colonial heritage and memories of by-gone glories seldom set cash registers to jangling.



Townsend's Inlet Bridge, linking Sea Isle City and Avalon, is part of Ocean Drive which originates at Absecon Beach.